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# Transformation

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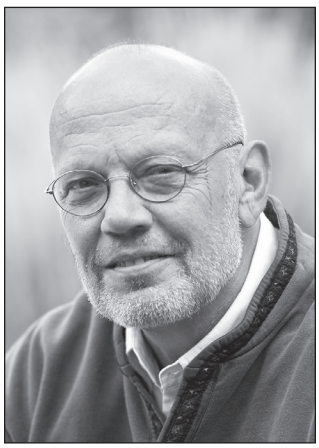

**by James Calvin Schaap**

Graduates of 2006, I have a long abiding memory of graduation, 36 years ago, the day that I sat at Commencement 1970 in my own steel chair, ready—anxious, really—to watch Sioux Center, Iowa, disappear forever in my rear-view mirror. It's an image really, not a story. And it's not of this day either; it's a picture my mind took the night before. We'd been out—and I don't have to say where—but we'd been out, late; and we brought some girls back to North Hall, which was, in the Cro-Magnon days, a women's dorm. We went in—which is in itself a story, the very act being grounds for expulsion back then—we went in—I don't know why—and politely escorted our female friends to their rooms. The RD's were long gone, I guess—and, it was late.

Once our friends were safely ensconced in their rooms, I walked out down the hallway. Back then the housekeeping crew washed bed sheets (do they still do that?); and before leaving, all students were required to strip their beds of sheets and pillow cases, then drop the whole white mess in a pile outside their doors.

So it's late at night—just a light or two on in the hallway—and the hallway is eerily lit with bundles of bedding, like so many dead sheep. That's the image I'll not forget, not because of some creepy fantasy but because that single image—and I knew it right then—signaled for me the end of things. Most students had already headed home; just the seniors and few hangers-on remained. Those half-darkened hallways, scattered with floor-bound ghosts, somehow told me that there was no turning back, that I couldn't start over, couldn't return, and that decisions—major decisions—now faced me, decisions I really didn't want to make.

Some biography. I'd just flunked my military draft physical in Sioux Falls, just that week, in fact, when an old heart defect was diagnosed, a palpita-

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Author of *Romey's Place*, *In the Silence There Are Ghosts*, *The Secrets of Barneveld Calvary* and others, Dr. James Calvin Schaap has been honored by the Associated Church Press and the Evangelical Press Association for his fiction. He has also written plays, histories, and numerous articles on Faith and Writing. Among his other titles are *On the Trail of the Spirit*, sixteen stories of people affected by the ministry of the Back to God Hour; *Every Bit of Who I Am*, a devotional for teens; and *Paternity*, a collection of short fiction. *Touches the Sky,* released last fall, was given an Award of Merit by *Christianity Today* in their annual book awards. His most recent work is *Fifty-Five and Counting*, released just this spring by Dordt Press. He has been teaching literature and writing at Dordt College for thirty years.

tion that kept me from Vietnam. My number—there'd been a draft lottery—was 187. If I had passed that physical, my choices would have narrowed. But I'd flunked, and I had no idea where I was going.

That chaotic late-night hallway created a heart-sickness I'll never forget. I had no clue of what lay ahead. My senior scramble had ended when a Calvin College girlfriend dropped me like a bad habit between semesters. I hadn't looked for a teaching job, not knowing whether or not I'd be drafted. I had no job, no significant other, no plans, nowhere to go but home; and that chaotic hallway full of dirty bedding was a reminder that I'd truly encountered the terror of end punctuation. It was scary—I mean it—and some of you know exactly what I'm talking about.

And here I am, 36 years later, looking forward to retirement, having spent most of the last thirty as a resident of Sioux Center, Iowa. God moves in mysterious ways.

There is a transformation in *my* story, a shift, but it's not San Andreas in proportion. It's a story hardly worth telling. And besides, this is your day and not mine.

But I'm interested in transformations, for a variety of reasons, and I'd like to start with one or two or three—all of which revolve around a single story, actually the marriage of two stories, two biographies. We have very few of Christ's sermons, but lots and lots of stories, so I hope you'll indulge me for a few minutes when I tell you one that happened right here in Sioux Center, the place I wanted so badly to leave.

But first, a definition. My dictionary defines "transform" in this way: "to alter markedly in appearance or form or nature or function or condition—to convert." It's not a difficult definition, and it's one which most easily comes to Christians in the idea of "the old, old story"—that's why I wanted us to sing that song. There's nothing shocking there, really, and yet it is, always—because to be transformed is to be changed in appearance or form or nature or function or condition, from the inside out.

And now, the story. Christian believers would say that this story, like yours and mine, begins in the tapestry of divine cause-and-effect, somewhere in the territory of eternity, a place not one of us can understand but all of us will someday experience. It starts in the mystery of eternal love beyond limitations of time and space, in the whole counsel of God, his eternal plan. I don't know about you, but I don't think about that idea all that much, even though I've been reared with the first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism:

"What is your only comfort in life and in death?"

"That I belong, body and soul, to my faithful savior, Jesus Christ."

I don't know about you, but it often seems to me that my choices are mine; as it did that late night in a seemingly vacant North Hall. The idea that God really has a plan for my life seems a cheap cliché—or so it often seems to me. Even though I didn't think about it much when I was your age, I don't think any of you would disagree with me when I say that our lives on this earth begin and end in the whole counsel of God.

But none of us are members of that council, so we need to start elsewhere. Given what we can grasp, it might be helpful to think that this story begins that moment the Vietnam War ends, with the fall of Saigon—April, 1975.

Most Americans who remember the end of that war would rather forget the images —the thwack-thwack of helicopters leaving government building rooftops, where dozens of Vietnamese wave frantically, hoping for a last-minute escape that will not come.

Scene two of this story takes place thousands of miles from Sioux Center, in the southeast Asian nation of Laos, where the departure of American troops made life dangerous for people who sided with the Yankees. Among them was an ethnic tribe called the Tai Dam, who had crossed from Laos into Thailand just two weeks after the fall of Saigon.

Back then, a former U.S. government official named Arthur Crisfield wrote thirty state governors with a plea to help the Tai Dam, who wanted a place to live en masse, not individually, a place to live as a people.

Crisfield's note arrived on the desk of then Iowa Governor Robert E. Ray—that's the third scene of this story. Ray responded to Crisfield's request,

confident of what he himself has called "the generous spirit of the people of Iowa," and offered the Tai Dam a home on the Iowa prairies, in its cities, towns and villages, on thousands of farmsteads on the gently rolling hills of its rich land.

Scene four takes place in the Des Moines airport, where, on November 17, 1975, in three separate flights, 300 Tai Dam refugees arrived.

But that scene is emblematic because all over the state, Iowans stood and waited at airports—in Sioux City, in Cedar Rapids, in Davenport—to greet Asian people who knew very little English or none at all, men, women, and children bewildered by a vast nation of what seemed unimaginable wealth. In a matter of hours, these two widely diverse people went home together.

Conflicts arose. Small agricultural communities are often resistant to change—"this is the way we've always done it, after all." The local café, no matter how delightful its cinnamon roles, can seem, to strangers, unwelcoming simply because it's so homey to others.

In September of 1979, a *Des Moines Register* poll found that more than half of the state's residents opposed the Governor's resettlement campaign. But Gov. Ray was committed to helping those who'd come to *our* aid in Southeast Asia. It was the right thing to do.

"What on earth has this to do with us?"—you're asking yourself. Laos, a former Iowa Governor, refugee resettlement before we were born. Stay tuned. The story I'm telling may well begin on wall maps, but it will continue on streets just off campus because even here in Sioux Center, Asian refugees, who dressed different and ate strange foods, lived right next door to retired farmers and Coop employees.

This story isn't always pleasant. When guests cooked in hot oil, whose acrid fumes filled—and stayed—in every room, some people turned up their noses. Most Iowans like their garlic in pinches, not handfuls. Soon, what *smells* starts to *stink*.

"If you're going to live here, learn to eat decent," some people thought—and said. "And learn English. You're here now—start acting like it." When anxiety gets defensive, fear morphs into bigotry. A cause that once appeared gallant and noble becomes downright difficult. "They want *what?* Do they think we're made of money? Give 'em a dime and they want a buck. That's ridiculous."

A volunteer I know in the first days of resettlement will never forget picking up a family from a local airport and bringing them to a tiny basement apartment they'd worked hard to secure, where they showed them nicely-made beds they'd received when they asked for donations. The next morning the volunteers discovered—largely through hand gestures—what the town's newest residents wanted most when the woman rubbed her legs and pointed. She wanted a pair of nylons.

But we've begun another chapter. Here, in the state's far northwest corner, several churches sponsored Asian refugee families, among them Bethel CRC of Sioux Center.

And now, we're coming closer to the B. J. Haan, May, 2006. Let me introduce a lead character. Adrianna De Wit Dokter was born and reared on a family farm—some hogs, some cattle, a few milk cows, and a bunch of pesky chickens. She was born in 1933 to devout Christian parents who wouldn't think of missing Sunday worship, twice.

Adrianna's childhood home placed devotion to God not only above any other human activity but within every dimension of life. The De Wit children, six of them in all, four sisters and two brothers, attended the Christian grade school in Hull and Western Christian just down the block. When she graduated, there was no Dordt College, so she went on to Northwestern, then took a teaching job in Rock Valley, a combination of fifth and sixth grade, with daily lesson plans that included a class called "Bible."

As often happens, and some of you will surely discover, teachers become the best learners when they immerse themselves in their subject matter. The study she had to do for that class, her sister says, made Adrianna an eager Bible learner, even more hearty as a believer.

I'm drawing out a life here—and it's not yours of course, nor is it mine. And yet it is—I want you to see yourselves in this story, mysterious and miraculous as it is and will be.

In 1953, Ed Dokter, from Sioux Center, came calling. But not long after, he left for the Army, for Korea, at the very end of the Korean War. His absence made both their hearts grow fonder, and

when he returned, they were married on June 27, 1956.

Now consider this. Aside from the fact that she was a school teacher, there's little to mark the life of Adrianna De Wit Dokter as different from that of any other young married woman of her era or this area. Together, she and Ed raised three children, and she volunteered frequently, managing voting machines for local and national elections, substituting in local schools, and working as an aid, sometimes teaching spelling and Bible and monitoring study halls.

*I'm drawing out a life here–and it's not yours of course, nor is it mine. And yet it is–I want you to see yourselves in this story, mysterious and miraculous as it is and will be.*

Today, her children describe their mother as traditional and proper in a Siouxland Dutch way: wear dresses to church, not slacks; avoid showyness; keep good Sabbath behavior; maintain a close relationship with the Lord. These were the major themes of their upbringing.

When the refugees began to arrive, Adrianna Dokter was in a prime position to help. She'd been a teacher; and with her youngest going into college, she was alone in a house that seemed far more empty than it had. She probably needed something to do. The ways of God are not totally mysterious, after all.

Like many others, she became a volunteer.

There is another central character in this story, as you can imagine. In 1975, when Ed and Adrianna's kids were walking to school, on the other side of the world, in Vientiane, Laos, Khay Baccam was a teenager but already a master player in the black market, where he dealt in contraband arms. He was rich, flipping out cold, hard cash to Laotian soldiers willing to sell their M-16s once the fighting stopped—and even when it hadn't. His great passion was money and power. To politics and morality, he was, at best, indifferent.

Adrianna Dokter had grown up on a family farm in a deeply religious home on the quiet plains of northwest Iowa. In southeast Asia, as a boy Khay Baccam had, with his family, followed his military father wherever the battle lines took them. He acquired an education on the messy streets of the capitol city of a bloodied, war-torn country. On those streets' black markets, he made made money and got power—basically, when he was your age.

It was all that money—he had too much—that led Communist soldiers to surround his place one night and arrest him. Soon enough, he found himself in a prison compound so remote there was no need for walls. For three long months his feet and hands were bound by wire so tight he could not walk to get food or use the latrine. His wrists turned gray, limp, and lifeless; his forearms swelled like sausages. Hope fled. All that remained in him was the stubborn will to survive.

When Ed and Adrianna were going to their kids' high school basketball games, Khay Baccam, his hands finally freed, was in prison, drawing pictures on the blades of his captor's swords, cars and motorcycles on the backs of t-shirts and military uniforms—tattoos in all varieties and colors, wilder probably than anything on your bodies. His drawing kept him alive.

In northwest Iowa, when Ed and Adrianna were doing devotions with their children after dinner just up the street, Khay Baccam, in a prison camp, watched a guard reach in to a bag the prisoners thought held cigarettes, then pull out the mutilated head of someone who had tried to escape.

In 1981, when Ed and Adrianna Dokter moved their church membership to a new fellowship because Bethel Church had outgrown itself, Khay Baccam, free from prison at last, sat in a shallow pond of water and watched the Thai refugee camp where he lived go up in smoke and flames. Many people died that night, but he and others, including his new wife, Feuang, took refuge in the fish ponds on the perimeter of the camp to avoid the flames and searing heat.

You may think I'm bringing you far afield to tell you this long story, but I hope you'll stay with me because trailing the Holy Spirit means tagging along with narratives that don't feel like sitcoms. And there's light here. There really is.

The day after the fire, Khay and Feueng witnessed something they'd never seen before—Christian people, Roman Catholic sisters, dispensing aid and comfort, food and clothing and blankets, to the dispossessed. Strangely, those women asked nothing in return.

He pointed at them and spoke to his mother-in-law. "You see what they *do*?" he asked. "The Christians come to help. Did you ever give them anything before? No—but they give everything to us." Khay found that strange, almost scary.

One night, a world away, at one of the first meetings of the Evangelism Committee of the Dokter's new church, Faith CRC, Sioux Center, Dr. Al Mennega, a professor of biology at Dordt, asked if that committee could provide the means for a new Laotian family resettlement in Sioux Center. Their names were Khay and Feuang Baccam. And they had a baby, a little girl named Soudalay.

Back in the Thai refugee camp just a bit earlier, the chair of the refugee board looked down at the papers in his hands and then up again at the young man and his wife and baby standing before him. Even though he had been a resident of that camp, Khay Baccam had run military secrets—and other things—back and forth for months across national borders, providing a service the captain understood. In many ways, the chairman of the refugee committee didn't want Khay Baccam to leave.

But Khay had made up his mind to change what he was, to be more of a husband, more of a servant. He was husband and a father. That new way of life would be easier in a new world.

The captain looked down at the papers. "Faith Christian Church," he said. "A church for a sponsor is a good thing." He sat back behind his disk and tapped the papers with his pencil. "A church will do much to help you."

And now, if you're keeping track, we begin chapter four, act four, of our story, a chapter which appears to end, sadly, with an event as unforeseen as the meeting of such vastly different people here in our neighborhood, in the heart of farm country.

On the night of August 5, 2002, twenty years after she'd begun to teach Khay and Feuang Baccam, Adrianna De Wit Dokter came home one afternoon, sat down in the rocker, and had a stroke. Two days later she was gone.

In terms of this earth, her untimely death ended a dear relationship that had grown into something far more than teacher and student, a relationship both of them treasured.

This story, the unlikely tale of people from such indescribably different backgrounds, is told best when you find yourself in it, even if it's only in your imagination.

You see, something developed between the two of them, something engineered in the whole council of God, something that can only be defined as eternal mystery.

But there are things we know. Adrianna's husband and her children swear their mother changed as a result of her weekly language lessons with Khay and Feuang. When she'd talk to her sister Betty, Adrianna would say that something she hadn't foreseen was happening in this ex-black marketer, this former concentration camp refugee, something that astounded her. "This man sees the big picture," she used to say to Betty—and to others. "I know that he sees the big picture."

But so had she. This young Asian man and his wife taught them—Adrianna first, and then Ed too—that there was a bigger picture than the immediate concerns of church and school and family. Not that those interests were somehow wrong or misguided, but Adrianna De Wit Dokter began to understand that the Christian life has far wider concerns than the extent of our reach and grasp.

Calvinist that she was, Adrianna Dokter would not want anyone to say that she "brought Khay Baccam to the Lord," as some believers might be fond of saying. God brought Khay—and Feuang—home to his love; Adrianna would want me to say that she was only an instrument, and not even the only one.

There's a line penciled onto her notes for a speech to volunteers helping other Asian refugees. This is what she scratched in to remember: "One man cannot do ministry; many men cannot do ministry. Only God can change hearts."

And there is more to Khay's conversion to the Christian faith than two decades of long and devoted conversations over the coffee Adrianna loved to share; there's more than the language training that became so much broader than mere words. There is, after all, that memory of gracious nuns giving selflessly, expecting nothing in return. Khay Baccam had never been much of a believer in anything, but Adrianna Dokter was not his Savior—and he knows that. His salvation belongs to the Lord.

Today, Khay Baccam is a preacher, an evangelist, a Bible-study leader, a mentor to dozens, even hundreds, of Lao and Thai Dam people in a region that spreads from Sioux City, north to the Twin Cities, west to South Dakota, and east, sometimes as far east as Des Moines. To God be the glory, forever and ever, Adrianna would say. But we'll violate no doctrine of Calvinist theology if we maintain, as humbly as she would, that she was, through those precious years, simply a blessed instrument of God's peace.

Why did this relationship flourish as it did? Not all of them did, of course. What happened here—exactly?

If there were twenty years of audio tapes of every meeting of Adrianna Dokter and Khay Baccam ever had, we might be able to find the exact moment when the roles "teacher" and "student" no longer had similar meanings.

What we have is Khay's narrative of this mystery of grace. At Adrianna's funeral, he told a story that comes close to answering the question of how what happened between them, did happen.

"I am Asian, Laotian," he said at the funeral, and he told the mourners that not for along time did anyone ask him what he believed or whether he'd fit in the community. "I never heard one such word," he told them. He held up a Bible, the Bible he'd received from her long ago, an old one scarred by a circle where a hundred cups of coffee had left their mark. "This shows how much she liked to drink coffee," he said.

For almost two years those teaching sessions went on, every week on Wednesday. One day, he said he asked her a question that had been weighing on him. "Adrianna," he said, "why do you come over here?—you don't have other work? You just sit here and listen to me talk, talk, talk," he told her. "But I want to hear something from you."

Adrianna told him, he said, that she was afraid he wouldn't understand what it was she wanted him to hear.

"Just tell me," he told her. "Don't be afraid of making mistakes—just tell me."

She told him that she'd been waiting for a long time for him to ask what he did—"many months and days"—and that now she could tell him what she felt, and then she said it: "I love you—I love your family. I am here and I am teaching you and I want you to know the Lord Jesus Christ."

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Khay Baccam told the mourners at Adrianna's funeral that he sat there for a moment and did nothing, then saw something that he'd never forget—her tears. He told himself he was nothing but an ordinary Laotian, so why would this woman cry for him? "What is it about *me* that's that important?" he asked himself. And then he looked at himself, he said, and he cried too.

"Something happened," he told the people in Faith Church at Adrianna's funeral, and he looked at the Bible with the coffee cup circle. "Something is in that book," and that's what he told Adrianna right then and there. "I would like to know more

about that—what is in that book. Tell me more about that, too."

That morning, the morning he became more than just a student, and Adrianna became far more than a teacher. Something heartfelt, something transcending language, passed between them.

When he began his story, Khay explained how thankful he was for the opportunity to say a few words, for "giving me a chance to speak about my friend...." Then he stopped, paused for just a moment, searching for just the right words: "—and I would say," he told them, "my mom too because when I speak she understands."

Christian believers will maintain that the great story in the relationship between Adrianna De Wit Dokter and Khay Baccam is how Khay himself, who knew so very little about the Christian faith, not only came to believe in Jesus Christ but also began to spread the good news of salvation to others, his friends and his people. That eternal story is the music most people will sing when they finish the story.

But there is another, and it is just as eternal, just as life-changing, just as transformative, because Khay Baccam, as much an instrument of God's eternal will and counsel as Adrianna herself, deeply affected, and even changed, the life of Adrianna Dokter. "If you always do what you've always done," she scribbled into her notes for a speech, "you'll always get what you've always got."

On the very day she suffered a stroke, Adrianna wrote an e-mail note to a former pastor. In that note she told him how plans for the new vacation Bible school at Sioux City's Lao Unity Church were progressing and how aware she was—even after twenty years—of the differences which exist between the two different cultures, specifically in planning and carrying out plans. "Oh well," she wrote, "it doesn't hurt us to bend a bit …; maybe God put the Laotians in our path so *we see* the *broader picture* of the *gospel*."

If there's one thing that Adrianna herself would want us to remember about all of this—if she could return right now and ramble on about the last twenty years of her relationships with the Lao community in northwest Iowa—she would likely tell us is that *she* was the recipient of grace, that the joy was hers, that the blessings of those years are, as the old song claims, "all mine, and ten thousand beside."

And that is something all of us—those who ascribe to the Christian faith and those who do not—can agree upon. Even though it always asks a great deal of us, selfless love replenishes far more than it requires.

There is no end to this story—no end but eternity. It resides, like all our stories, and like the ones which follow, in the whole counsel of the Lord our God.

Brothers and sisters, I have no idea how many of you might say that you've been transformed by your Dordt College education—I wouldn't have when I sat in those chairs 36 years ago. It took some time for me to understand that all that business about "every square inch" wasn't just Dordtspeak—it was more; it was bigger. It took me some time to realize it wasn't just book-learning.

And I hope you grasp from this long story that transformation isn't a one-time deal. It's ongoing, and it's called "sanctification." What I knew when I sat in that chair in 1970 was nothing compared to what I knew six years later, when I returned to Dordt College as a prof. And today, my own family grown, I've been transformed again and will be again and again and again until God takes me as he has his servant Adrianna.

The Bible is all about transformation, of course, but there are very few specific verses in the NIV which use the word. However, it's fair to say, I think, that all the employees of Dordt College—faculty and staff—share with me this mission-statement, wrapped up in Romans 12: We hope your Dordt College education has given you the eye-wear to "test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" so that you—all of you—will not "conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds."

At the same time, the Calvinists among us—including me and Adrianna Dokter—realize full well that this transformation is nothing we do. We are, all of us, recipients of grace. We "are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit," or so says Paul in II Corinthians.

It is crucial to know that Adrianna Dokter was

not all that interested in teaching Khay Baccam the English language. It was not a job she actively sought, and when asked, at least at first, she was far more a Jonah—which is to say, far more like most of us—than you might think.

What I'm asking you to do is to let yourself be used, to let yourself be transformed, to allow yourself to become, in every walk of lie, in every calling you undertake, instruments of peace.

*It took some time for me to understand that all that business about "every square inch" wasn't just Dordtspeak–it was more; it was bigger.*

One more thing. That image of the messy, darkened hallway and what it meant—and how scared I was and how I had no clear sense at all of what was in front of me—that image is still with me, in part because for better or for worse, often enough in my own life, even today, the world I live in looks just about as messy. Oh, there are times when there's much more light and far less old bedding; but then are others when the only light seems really dim and the place is even more a mess. Wish it weren't so, but nobody in Sioux Center or Galilee ever promised any of you a rose garden. Life is full of unforeseen twists and turns—listen to this: when she was your age, would Adrianna ever have dreamt there was a Khay Baccam? Khay could not have imagined Adrianna Dokter! Life is full of unforeseen twists and turns, and the truth is that at least half of them are unpleasant at best. But our calling—our highest calling—is to be God's people in a broken world.

Adrianna's son-in-law wrote me a note after he read this speech, and he said to tell you this—and I am because it's true: "As good as it is to make plans for the future, it is even better to be humble enough to fit into God's design, because his adventures for us are far better than anything we orchestrate for ourselves."

That's the world we're called to, that's the world Adrianna Dokter knew, the world Khay Baccam deals with every day. Most importantly—and I hope you know this, at least in part because of your education at Dordt College—it's the very world God loved so much he gave his only begotten son.

Brothers and sisters, just as it was for me 36 years ago when I sat in one of those chairs, and just as it is for everyone of us in the B. J. Haan [Auditorium], it's time to go. Let me conclude with these words from Colossians 3:

**"**Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."